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IT WAS EARLY September, a busy time of year for raising the dead. The pre-Halloween rush seemed to start earlier and earlier every year. Every animator at Animators Inc. was booked solid. I was no exception; in fact, I'd been offered more work than even my ability to go without sleep could supply.

Mr. Leo Harlan should have been grateful to get the appointment. He didn't look grateful. Truthfully, he didn't have the look of anything. Harlan was medium. Medium height, dark hair, but not too dark. Skin neither too pale nor too tan. Eyes brown, but an indistinguishable shade of brown. In fact the most remarkable thing about Mr. Harlan was that there was nothing remarkable about him. Even his suit was dark, conservative. A businessman's outfit that had been in style for the last twenty years and probably would still be in style twenty years down the road. His shirt was white, his tie neatly knotted, his not-too-big, not-too-small hands were well groomed but not manicured.

His appearance told me so little that that in itself was interesting, and vaguely disturbing.

I took a sip from my coffee mug with the motto, "If you slip me decaf, I'll rip your head off." I'd brought it to work when our boss, Bert, had put decaf in the coffee-maker without telling anyone, thinking we wouldn't notice. Half the office thought they had mono for a week, until we discovered Bert's dastardly plot.

The coffee that our secretary, Mary, had gotten for Mr.

Harlan sat on the edge of my desk. His mug was the one with the logo of Animators Inc. on it. He'd taken a minute sip of the coffee, when Mary had first handed it to him. He'd taken the coffee black, but he sipped it like he hadn't tasted it, or it didn't really matter what it tasted like. He'd taken it out of politeness, not out of desire.

I sipped my own coffee, heavy on the sugar and cream, trying to make up for the late work the night before. Caffeine and sugar, the two basic food groups.

His voice was like the rest of him, so ordinary it was extraordinary. He spoke with absolutely no accent, no hint of region, or country. "I want you to raise my ancestor, Ms. Blake."

"So you said."

"You seem to doubt me, Ms. Blake."

"Call it skepticism."

"Why would I come in here and lie to you?"

I shrugged. "People have done it before."

"I assure you, Ms. Blake, I am telling the truth."

Trouble was, I just didn't believe him. Maybe I was being paranoid, but my left arm under the nice navy suit jacket was crisscrossed with scars—from the crooked cross-shaped burn scar, where a vampire's servant had branded me, to the slashing claw marks of a shape-shifted witch. Plus knife scars, thin and clean compared to the rest. My right arm had only one knife scar, it was nothing in comparison. And there were other scars hidden under the navy skirt and royal blue shell. Silk didn't care if it slid over scars or smooth, untouched skin. I'd earned my right to be paranoid.

"What ancestor do you want raised, and why?" I smiled when I said it, pleasant, but the smile didn't reach my eyes. I'd begun to have to work at getting my smiles to reach all the way up to my eyes.

He smiled too, and it left his eyes as unaffected as my own. Smile because you were smiled at, not because it really meant anything. He reached out to pick up the coffee mug again, and this time I noticed a heaviness in the

left front of his jacket. He wasn't wearing a shoulder holster—I'd have noticed that—but there was something heavier than a wallet in his left breast pocket. It could have been a lot of things, but my first thought was, *gun*. I've learned to listen to my first thoughts. You're not paranoid if people really are out to get you.

I had my own gun tucked under my left arm in a shoulder holster. That evened things up, but I did not want my office to turn into the O. K. Corral. He had a gun. Maybe. Probably. For all I knew it could have been a really heavy cigar case. But I'd have bet almost anything that that heaviness was a weapon. I could either sit here and try to talk myself out of that belief, or I could act as if I was right. If I was wrong, I'd apologize later; if I was right, well, I'd be alive. Better alive and rude than dead and polite.

I interrupted his talk about his family tree. I hadn't really heard any of it. I was fixated on that heaviness in his pocket. Until I found out whether it was a gun or not, nothing else much mattered to me. I smiled and forced it up into my eyes. "What is it exactly that you do for a living, Mr. Harlan?"

He drew a slightly deeper breath, settling into his chair, just a bit. It was the closest thing I'd seen to tension in the man. The first real, human movement. People fidget. Harlan didn't.

People don't like dealing with people who raise the dead. Don't ask me why, but we make them nervous. Harlan wasn't nervous, he wasn't anything. He was just sitting across the desk from me, chilling, nondescript eyes pleasant and empty. I was betting he'd lied about his reason for coming here and that he'd brought a gun hidden on his person in a place that wasn't easy to spot.

I was liking Leo Harlan less and less.

I sat my coffee mug gently on my desk blotter, still smiling. I'd freed up my hands, which was step one. Drawing my gun would be step two; I was hoping to avoid that step.

“I want you to raise one of my ancestors, Ms. Blake. I don’t see where my work has any relevance here.”

“Humor me,” I said, still smiling, but feeling it slide out of my eyes like melting ice.

“Why should I?” he said.

“Because if you don’t, I’ll refuse to take your case.”

“Mr. Vaughn, your boss, has already taken my money. He accepted on your behalf.”

I smiled, and this time it held real humor. “Actually, Bert is only the business manager at Animators Inc., now. Most of us are full partners in the firm, like a law firm. Bert still handles the business end of things, but he’s not exactly my boss anymore.”

His face, if it was possible, went quieter, more closed, more secretive. It was like looking at a bad painting, one that had all the technicalities down, yet held no feel of life. The only humans I’d ever seen that could be this closed down were scary ones.

“I wasn’t aware of your change in status, Ms. Blake.” His voice had gone a tone deeper, but it was as empty as his face.

He was ringing every alarm bell I had, my shoulders were tight with the need to pull my gun first. My hands slid downward without me thinking about it. It wasn’t until his hands raised to the arms of his chair that I realized what I’d done. We were both maneuvering to a better position to draw down.

Suddenly there was tension, thick and heavy like invisible lightning in the room. There was no more doubt. I saw it in his empty eyes, and in the small smile on his face. This was a real smile, no fake, no pretense. We were seconds away from doing one of the most real things one human being can do to another. We were about to try to kill each other. I watched, not his eyes, but his upper body, waiting for that betraying movement. There was no more doubt, we both knew.

Into that heavy, heavy tension, his voice fell like a stone thrown down a deep well. His voice alone almost

made me go for my gun. "I am a contract killer, but I'm not here for you, Anita Blake."

I didn't take my eyes from his body, the tension didn't slacken. "Why tell me then?" My voice was softer than his, almost breathy.

"Because I haven't come to St. Louis to kill anyone. I really am interested in getting my ancestor raised from the dead."

"Why?" I asked, still watching his body, still treading the tension.

"Even hitmen have hobbies, Ms. Blake." His voice was matter-of-fact, but his body stayed very, very still. I realized, suddenly, that he was trying not to spook me.

I let my gaze flick to his face. It was still bland, still unnaturally empty, but it also held something else . . . a trace of humor.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"I didn't know that coming to see you was tempting fate."

"What do you mean?" I was trying to hold on to that edge of tension, but it was slipping away. He sounded too ordinary, too suddenly real, for me to keep thinking about drawing a gun and shooting up my office. It suddenly seemed a little silly, and yet . . . looking into his dead eyes that humor never completely filled, it didn't seem all that silly.

"There are people all over the world who would love to see me dead, Ms. Blake. There are people who have spent considerable money and effort to see that such a thing would happen, but no one has come close, until today."

I shook my head. "This wasn't close."

"Normally, I'd agree with you, but I knew something of your reputation, so I didn't wear a gun in my usual manner. You noticed the weight of it when I bent forward that last time, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"If we'd had to draw down on each other, your holster

is a few seconds faster than this inner jacket shit that I'm wearing."

"Then why wear it?" I asked.

"I didn't want to make you nervous by coming in here armed, but I don't go anywhere unarmed, so I thought I'd be slick, and you wouldn't notice."

"I almost didn't."

"Thanks for that, but we both know better."

I wasn't sure about that, but I let it go; no need to argue when I seemed to be winning.

"What do you really want, Mr. Harlan, if that is your real name?"

He smiled at that. "As I've said, I really do want my ancestor raised from the dead. I didn't lie about that." He seemed to think for a second. "Strange, but I haven't lied about anything." He looked puzzled. "It's been a long time since that was true."

"My condolences," I said.

He frowned at me. "What?"

"It must be difficult never being able to tell the truth. I know I'd find it exhausting."

He smiled, and again it was that slight flexing of lips that seemed to be his genuine smile. "I haven't thought about it in a long time." He shrugged. "I guess you get used to it."

It was my turn to shrug. "Maybe. What ancestor do you want raised, and why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to raise this particular ancestor?"

"Does it matter?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe the dead should be disturbed without a good reason."

That small smile flexed again. "You've got animators in this town that raise zombies every night for entertainment."

I nodded. "Then by all means go to one of them."

They'll do anything you want, pretty much, if the price is right."

"Can they raise a corpse that's almost two hundred years old?"

I shook my head. "Out of their league."

"I heard an animator could raise almost anything, if they were willing to do a human sacrifice." His voice was quiet.

I shook my head, again. "Don't believe everything you hear, Mr. Harlan. *Some* animators could raise a few hundred years worth of corpse with the help of a human sacrifice. Of course, that would be murder and thus illegal."

"Rumor has it that you've done it."

"Rumor can say anything it damn well pleases, I don't do human sacrifice."

"So you can't raise my ancestor." He made it a flat statement.

"I didn't say that."

His eyes widened, the closest to surprise that he'd shown. "You can raise a nearly two-hundred-year-old corpse without a human sacrifice?"

I nodded.

"Rumor said that, too, but I didn't believe it."

"So you believed that I did human sacrifice, but not that I could raise a few hundred years worth of dead people on my own."

He shrugged. "I'm used to people killing other people, I've never seen anyone raised from the dead."

"Lucky you."

He smiled, and his eyes thawed just a little. "So you'll raise my ancestor?"

"If you tell me a good enough reason for doing it."

"You don't get distracted much, do you, Ms. Blake."

"Tenacious, that's me," I said, and smiled. Maybe I'd spent too much time around really bad people, but now that I knew that Leo Harlan wasn't here to kill me, or anyone else in town, I had no problem with him. Why

did I believe him? For the same reason I hadn't believed him the first time. Instinct.

"I've followed the records of my family in this country back as far as I can, but my original ancestor is on no official documents. I believe he gave a false name from the beginning. Until I get his true name, I can't track my family through Europe. I very much wish to do that."

"Raise him, ask his real name, his real reason for coming to this country, and put him back?" I made it a question.

Harlan nodded. "Exactly."

"It sounds reasonable enough."

"So you'll do it," he said.

"Yes, but it ain't cheap. I'm probably the only animator in this country that can raise someone this old without using a human sacrifice. It's sort of a seller's market, if you catch my drift."

"In my own way, Ms. Blake, I am as good at my job as you are at yours." He tried to look humble and failed. He looked pleased with himself, all the way to those ordinary, and frightening, brown eyes. "I can pay, Ms. Blake, never fear."

I mentioned an outrageous figure. He never flinched. He started to reach into the inside of his jacket. I said, "Don't."

"My credit card, Ms. Blake, nothing more." He took his hands out of his jacket and held them, fingers spread, so I could see them clearly.

"You can finish the paperwork and pay in the outer office. I've got other appointments."

He almost smiled. "Of course." He stood. I stood. Neither of us offered to shake hands. He hesitated at the door; I stopped a ways back, not following as closely as I normally do. Room to maneuver, you know.

"When can you do the job?"

"I'm booked solid this week. I might be able to squeeze you in next Wednesday. Maybe next Thursday."

“What happened to next Monday and Tuesday?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Booked up.”

“You said, and I quote, ‘I’m booked solid this week.’ Then you mentioned next Wednesday.”

I shrugged again. There was a time when I wasn’t good at lying, even now I’m not great at it, but not for the same reasons. I felt my eyes going flat and empty, as I said, “I meant to say I was booked up for most of the next two weeks.”

He stared at me, hard enough to make me want to squirm. I fought off the urge and just gave him blank, vaguely friendly eyes.

“Next Tuesday is the night of the full moon,” he said in a quiet voice.

I blinked at him, fighting to keep the surprise off my face, and I think I succeeded, but I failed on my body language. My shoulders tensed, my hands flexed. Most people noticed your face, not the rest of you, but Harlan was a man who would notice. Damn it.

“So it’s the full moon, yippee-skippy, what of it?” My voice was as matter-of-fact as I could make it.

He gave that small smile of his. “You’re not very good at being coy, Ms. Blake.”

“No, I’m not, but since I’m not being coy, that’s not a problem.”

“Ms. Blake,” he said, voice almost cajoling, “please, do not insult my intelligence.”

I thought about saying, *but it’s so easy*, but didn’t. First, it wasn’t easy at all; second, I was a little nervous about where this line of questioning was going. But I was not going to help him by volunteering information. Say less, it irritates people.

“I haven’t insulted your intelligence.”

He made a frown that I think was as true as that small smile. The real Harlan peeking through. “Rumor says that you haven’t worked on the night of the full moon for a few months now.” He seemed very serious all of a sudden,

not in a menacing way, almost as if I'd been impolite, forgotten my table manners, or something, and he was correcting me.

"Maybe I'm Wiccan. The full moon is a holy day for them you know. Or rather night."

"Are you Wiccan, Ms. Blake?"

It never took me long to grow tired of word games. "No, Mr. Harlan, I am not."

"Then why don't you work on the night of the full moon?" He was studying my face, searching it, as if for some reason the answer were more important than it should have been.

I knew what he wanted me to say. He wanted me to confess to being a shape-shifter of some kind. Trouble was I couldn't confess, because it wasn't true. I was the first human Nimir-Ra, leopard queen, of a wereleopard pard in their history. I'd inherited the leopards when I was forced to kill their old leader, to keep him from killing me. I was also Bolverk of the local werewolf pack. Bolverk was more than a bodyguard, less than an executioner. It was basically someone who did the things that the Ulfric either couldn't, or wouldn't do. Richard Zeeman was the local Ulfric. He'd been my off-again, on-again honey-bun for a couple of years. Right now, it was off, very off. His parting shot to me had been, "*I don't want to love someone who is more at home with the monsters than I am.*" What do you say to that? What can you say? Damned if I know. They say love conquers everything. They lie.

As Nimir-Ra and Bolverk, I had people depending on me. I took the full moon off, so I'd be available. It was simple really, and nothing I was willing to share with Leo Harlan.

"I sometimes take personal days, Mr. Harlan. If they've coincided with the full moon, I assure you, it's coincidental."

"Rumor says you got cut up by a shifter a few months back, and now you're one of them." His voice was still

quiet, but I was ready for this one. My face, my body, everything was calm, because he was wrong.

“I am not a shape-shifter, Mr. Harlan.”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t believe you, Ms. Blake.”

I sighed. “I don’t really care if you believe me, Mr. Harlan. My being a lycanthrope, or not, has no bearing on how good I am at raising the dead.”

“Rumor says you’re the best, but you keep telling me the rumors are wrong. Are you really as good as they say you are?”

“Better.”

“You’re rumored to have raised entire graveyards.”

I shrugged. “You’ll turn a girl’s head with talk like that.”

“Are you saying it’s true?”

“Does it really matter? Let me repeat: I can raise your ancestor, Mr. Harlan. I’m one of the few, if not the only, animator in this country that can do it without resorting to a human sacrifice.” I smiled at him, my professional smile, the one that was all bright and shiny and as empty of meaning as a lightbulb. “Will next Wednesday or Thursday be alright?”

He nodded. “I’ll leave my cell phone number, you can reach me twenty-four hours a day.”

“Are you in a hurry for this?”

“Let’s just say that I never know when an offer may come my way that I would find hard to resist.”

“Not just money,” I said.

He gave that smile again. “No, not just money, Ms. Blake. I have enough money, but a job that holds new interests . . . new challenges. I’m always searching for that.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Mr. Harlan. There’s always someone out there bigger and badder than you are.”

“I have not found it so.”

I smiled then. “Either you’re even scarier than you seem, or you haven’t been meeting the right people.”

He looked at me for a long moment, until I felt the smile slide from my eyes. I met his dead eyes with my own. In that moment that well of quietness filled me. It was a peaceful place, the place I went when I killed. A great white static empty place, where nothing hurt, where nothing felt. Looking into Harlan's empty eyes, I wondered if his head was white and empty and staticky. I almost asked, but I didn't, because for just a second I thought he'd lied, lied about it all, and he was going to try and draw his gun from his jacket. It would explain why he wanted to know if I was a shape-shifter. For a heartbeat or two, I thought I'd have to kill Mr. Leo Harlan. I wasn't scared now or nervous, I just readied myself. It was his choice, live or die. There was nothing but that slow eternal second where choices are made and lives are lost.

Then he shook himself, almost like a bird settling its feathers back in place. "I was about to remind you that I am a very scary person all by myself, but I won't now. It would be stupid to keep playing with you like this, like poking a rattlesnake with a stick."

I just looked at him with empty eyes, still held in that quiet place. My voice came out slow, careful, like my body felt. "I hope you haven't lied to me today, Mr. Harlan."

He gave that unsettling smile. "So do I, Ms. Blake, so do I." With that odd comment, he opened the door carefully, never taking his eyes from me. Then he turned and left quickly, shutting the door firmly behind him, and left me alone with the adrenaline rush draining like a puddle to my feet.

It wasn't fear that left me weak, but the adrenaline. I raised the dead for a living and was a legal vampire executioner. Wasn't that unique enough? Did I have to attract scary clients too?

I knew I should have told Harlan no dice, but I had told him the truth. I *could* raise this zombie, and no one else in the country could do it—without a human sacri-

face. I was pretty sure that if I turned it down, Harlan would find someone else to do it. Someone else that didn't have either my abilities or my morals. Sometimes you deal with the devil not because you want to, but because if you don't, someone else will.

2

LINDEL CEMETERY WAS one of those new modern affairs, where all the headstones are low to the ground and you aren't allowed to plant flowers. It makes mowing easier, but it also makes for a depressingly empty space. Nothing but flat land, with little oblong shapes in the dark. It was as empty and featureless as the dark side of the moon, and about as cheerful. Give me a cemetery with tombs and mausoleums, stone angels weeping over the portraits of children, the Mother Mary praying for us all, her silent eyes turned heavenward. A cemetery should have something to remind the people passing by that there is a heaven, and not just a hole in the ground with rock on top of it.

I was here to raise Gordon Bennington from the dead because Fidelis Insurance Company hoped he was a suicide, not an accidental death. There was a multimillion dollar insurance claim at stake. The police had ruled the death accidental, but Fidelis wasn't satisfied. They opted to pay my rather substantial fee in the hopes of saving millions. I was expensive, but not that expensive. Compared with what they stood to lose, I was a bargain.

There were three groups of cars in the cemetery. Two of the groups were at least fifty feet apart because both Mrs. Bennington and Fidelis's head lawyer, Arthur Conroy, had restraining orders against each other. The third group of two cars was parked in between the others. A marked police car and an unmarked police car. Don't ask

me to explain how I knew it was an unmarked police car, it just had that look.

I parked a little in back of the first group of cars. I got out of my brand new Jeep Grand Cherokee, which was partially purchased by money I got from my now deceased Jeep Country Squire. The insurance company hadn't wanted to pay up on my claim. They didn't believe that werheynas had eaten the Country Squire. They sent out some people to take photos and measurements, to see the bloodstains. They finally paid up, but they also dropped my policy. I'm paying month by month to a new company that will grant me a full policy, if, and only if, I can manage not to destroy another car for two years. Fat chance of that. My sympathies were all for Gordon Bennington's family. Of course, it's hard to have sympathy for an insurance company that is trying to squirm out of paying a widow with three children.

The cars closest to me turned out to be those of Fidelis Insurance. Arthur Conroy came towards me, hand outstretched. He was on the tall end of short, with thinning blond hair that he combed over his bald spot, as if that hid it, silver-framed glasses that circled large gray eyes. If his eyelashes and eyebrows had been darker, his eyes would have been his best feature. But his eyes were so large and unadorned that I thought he looked vaguely froglike. But then maybe my recent disagreement with my insurance company had made me uncharitable. Maybe.

Conroy was accompanied by a near-solid wall of other dark-suited men. I shook Conroy's hand and glanced behind him at the two six-foot-plus men.

"Bodyguards?" I made it a question.

Conroy's eyes widened. "How did you know?"

I shook my head. "They look like bodyguards, Mr. Conroy."

I shook hands with the other two Fidelis people. I didn't offer to shake hands with the bodyguards. Most of them won't shake hands, even if you do offer. I don't

know if it ruins the tough-guy image or they just want to keep their gun hands free. Either way, I didn't offer, and neither did they.

The dark-haired bodyguard, with shoulders nearly as broad as I was tall, smiled, though. "So you're Anita Blake."

"And you are?"

"Rex, Rex Canducci."

I raised eyebrows at him. "Is Rex really your first name?"

He laughed, that surprised burst of laughter that is so masculine—and usually at a woman's expense. "No."

I didn't bother to ask what his real first name was, probably something embarrassing, like Florence, or Rosie. The second bodyguard was blond and silent. He watched me with small pale eyes. I didn't like him.

"And you are?" I asked.

He blinked as if my asking had surprised him. Most people ignored bodyguards, some out of fear of not knowing what to do, because they've never met one; some because they have met one and figure they're just furniture, to be ignored until needed.

He hesitated, then said, "Balfour."

I waited a second, but he didn't add anything. "Balfour, one name, like Madonna or Cher?" I asked, voice mild.

His eyes narrowed, his shoulders a little tense. He'd been too easy to rattle. He had the stare down and the sense of menace, but he was just muscle. Scary looking, and knew it, but maybe not much else.

Rex intervened, "I thought you'd be taller." He made it a joke, with his happy-to-meet-you voice.

Balfour's shoulders had relaxed, the tension draining away. They'd worked together before, and Rex knew that his partner was not the most stable cookie in the box.

I met Rex's eyes. Balfour would be a problem if things turned messy, he'd overreact. Rex wouldn't.

I heard raised voices, one of them a woman. Shit. I'd told Mrs. Bennington's lawyers to keep her home. They'd

either ignored me or been unable to withstand her winning personality.

The nice plainclothes policeman was talking to her, his voice calm, but carrying, in a low, wordless rumble, as he, apparently, tried to keep her fifty feet away from Conroy. Weeks ago she'd slapped the lawyer, and he'd bitch-slapped her back. She'd then put a fist to his jaw and sat him on his ass. That was about the time the court bailiffs had had to step in and break things up.

I'd been present for all the festivities, because I was part of the court settlement, sort of. Tonight would decide the issue. If Gordon Bennington rose from the grave and said he'd died by accident, Fidelis had to pay. If he admitted to suicide, then Mrs. Bennington got nothing. I called her *Mrs.* Bennington at her insistence. When I'd referred to her as *Ms.* Bennington, she'd nearly bitten my head off. She was not one of your liberated women. She liked being a wife and mother. I was glad for her, it meant more freedom for the rest of us.

I sighed and walked across the white gravel driveway towards the sound of rising voices. I passed the uniformed cop leaning against his car. I nodded, said, "Hi."

He nodded back, his eyes mostly on the insurance people, as if someone had told him that it was his job to make sure they didn't start coming over. Or maybe he just didn't like the size of Rex and Balfour. Both men had him by a hundred pounds. He was slender for a police officer and still had that untried look in his face, as if he hadn't been on the job long, and hadn't yet quite decided whether he wanted to be on the job at all.

Mrs. Bennington was yelling at the nice officer who was barring her way. "Those bastards have hired her, and she'll do what they say. She'll make Gordon lie, I know it!"

I sighed. I'd explained to everyone that the dead don't lie. Pretty much only the judge had believed me, and the cops. I think Fidelis thought my fee had insured their outcome, and Mrs. Bennington thought the same.

She finally spotted me over the cop's broad shoulders. In her high heels she was taller than the officer. Which meant she was tall, and he wasn't very. He was maybe five nine, tops.

She tried to push past him, yelling at me now. He moved just enough so that he blocked her way, but didn't have to grab her. She banged against his shoulder and frowned down at him. It stopped her yelling, for a second.

"Get out of my way," she said.

"Mrs. Bennington," his deep voice grumbled, "Ms. Blake is here by order of the court. You have to let her do her job." He had short gray hair, a little longer on top. I didn't think it was a fashion statement, more like he hadn't had time to go to the barbershop in awhile.

She tried to push past him again, and this time she grabbed him, as if she'd move him out of her way. He wasn't tall, but he was broad, built like a square, a muscular square. She realized quickly that she couldn't push him, so she moved to walk around him, still determined to give me a piece of her mind.

He had to grab her arm to keep her away from me. She raised a hand to him, and his deep voice came clear in the still October night, "If you hit me, I will handcuff you and put you in the back of the squad car until we're all finished here."

She hesitated, her hand raised, but there must have been something in his face, still turned away from me, that said, clearly, that he meant every word.

His tone of voice had been enough for me. I'd have done what he said.

Finally, she lowered her arm. "I'll have your badge if you touch me."

"Striking a police officer is considered a crime, Mrs. Bennington," he said in that deep voice.

Even by moonlight you could see the astonishment on her face, as if somehow she hadn't quite realized any of the rules applied to her. The realization seemed to take a lot of the wind out of her. She settled back and let her

cadre of dark-suited lawyers lead her a little away from the nice police officer.

I was the only one close enough to hear him say, "If she'd been my wife, I'd have shot myself too."

I laughed, I couldn't help it.

He turned, eyes angry, defensive, but whatever he saw in my face made him smile.

"Count yourself lucky," I said, "I've seen Mrs. Bennington on several occasions." I held out my hand.

He shook like he meant business, good, solid. "Lieutenant Nicols, and my condolences on having to deal with . . ." He hesitated.

I finished the sentence for him, ". . . that crazy bitch. I believe that is the phrase you're searching for."

He nodded. "That is the phrase. I sympathize with a widow and children getting the money that is due them," he said, "but she makes it awful hard to sympathize with her personally."

"I've noticed that," I said, smiling.

He laughed and reached into his jacket for a pack of cigarettes. "Mind?"

"Not out here in the open, I guess. Besides, you've earned it, dealing with our wonderful Mrs. Bennington."

He tapped the cigarette out with one of those expert movements that longtime smokers use. "If Gordon Bennington rises from the grave and says he offed himself, she is going to go ballistic, Ms. Blake. I'm not allowed to shoot her, but I'm not sure what else I'm going to be able to do with her."

"Maybe her lawyers can sit on her. I think there's enough of them to hold her down."

He put the cig between his lips, still talking. "They've been fu . . . freaking useless, too afraid of losing their fee."

"Fucking useless, Lt. Fucking useless is the phrase you're searching for."

He laughed again, hard enough that he had to take the cigarette out of his mouth. "Fucking useless, yeah, that's

the phrase.” He put the cig between his lips again and took out one of those big metal lighters that you don’t see much anymore. The flame flared orangey red, as he cupped his hands around it automatically, even though there was no wind. When the end of his cig was glowing bright, he snapped the lighter shut and slid it back into his pocket, then took the cig out of his mouth and blew a long line of smoke.

I took an involuntary step back to avoid the smoke, but we were outdoors and Mrs. Bennington was enough to drive anyone to smoke. Or would that be drink?

“Can you call in more men?”

“They won’t be allowed to shoot her either,” Nicols said.

I smiled. “No, but maybe they can form a wall of flesh and keep her from hurting anyone.”

“I could probably get another uniform, maybe two, but that’s it. She’s got connections with the top brass because she’s got money, and may end up having a lot more after tonight. But she’s also been fucking unpleasant.” He seemed to relish saying the F-word almost as much as smoking the cigarette, as if he’d had to watch his language around the grieving widow, and it had hurt.

“Her political clout getting a little tarnished?” I asked.

“The papers plastered her decking Conroy all over the front page. The powers that be are worried that this is going to turn into a mess, and they don’t want the mess to land on them.”

“So they’re distancing themselves in case she does something even more unfortunate,” I said.

He took a deep, deep pull off the cig, holding it almost like someone smoking a joint, then let the smoke trickle out of his mouth and nose as he answered me, “Distancing, that’s one word for it.”

“Bailing, jumping ship, abandoning ship . . .”

He was laughing again, and he hadn’t finished blowing out all the smoke, so he choked just a little, but didn’t

seem to mind. "I don't know if you're really this amusing or if I just needed a laugh."

"It's stress," I said, "most people don't find me funny at all."

He gave me a look sort of sideways out of surprisingly pale eyes. I was betting they were blue in sunlight. "I heard that about you, that you were a pain in the ass, and rub a lot of people the wrong way."

I shrugged. "A girl does what she can."

He smiled. "But the same people that said you could be a pain in the ass had no trouble working a case with you. Fact is, Ms. Blake," he threw the cigarette on the ground, "most said they'd take you as backup over a lot of cops they could name."

I didn't know what to say to that. There is no higher praise between policemen than that they'd let you back them up in a life or death situation.

"You're going to make me blush, Lt. Nicols." I didn't look at him as I said it.

He seemed to be gazing down at the still-smoldering cigarette on the white gravel. "Zerbrowski over at RPIT says that you don't blush much."

"Zerbrowski is a cheerfully lecherous shit," I said.

He chuckled, a deep roll of laughter, and stomped out his cigarette, so that even that small glow was lost in the dark. "That he is, that he is. You ever met his wife?"

"I've met Katie."

"Ever wonder how Zerbrowski managed to nab her?"

"Every damn time I see her," I said.

He sighed. "I'll call for another squad car, try for two uniforms. Let's get this done and get the hell away from these people."

"Let's," I said.

He went to make the call. I went to fetch my zombie-raising equipment. Since one of my main tools is a machete bigger than my forearm, I'd left it in the car. It tends to scare people. I would try very hard tonight not to scare

the bodyguards, or the nice policemen. I was pretty sure there was nothing I could do to scare Mrs. Bennington. I was also pretty sure there was nothing I could do to make her happy with me.